

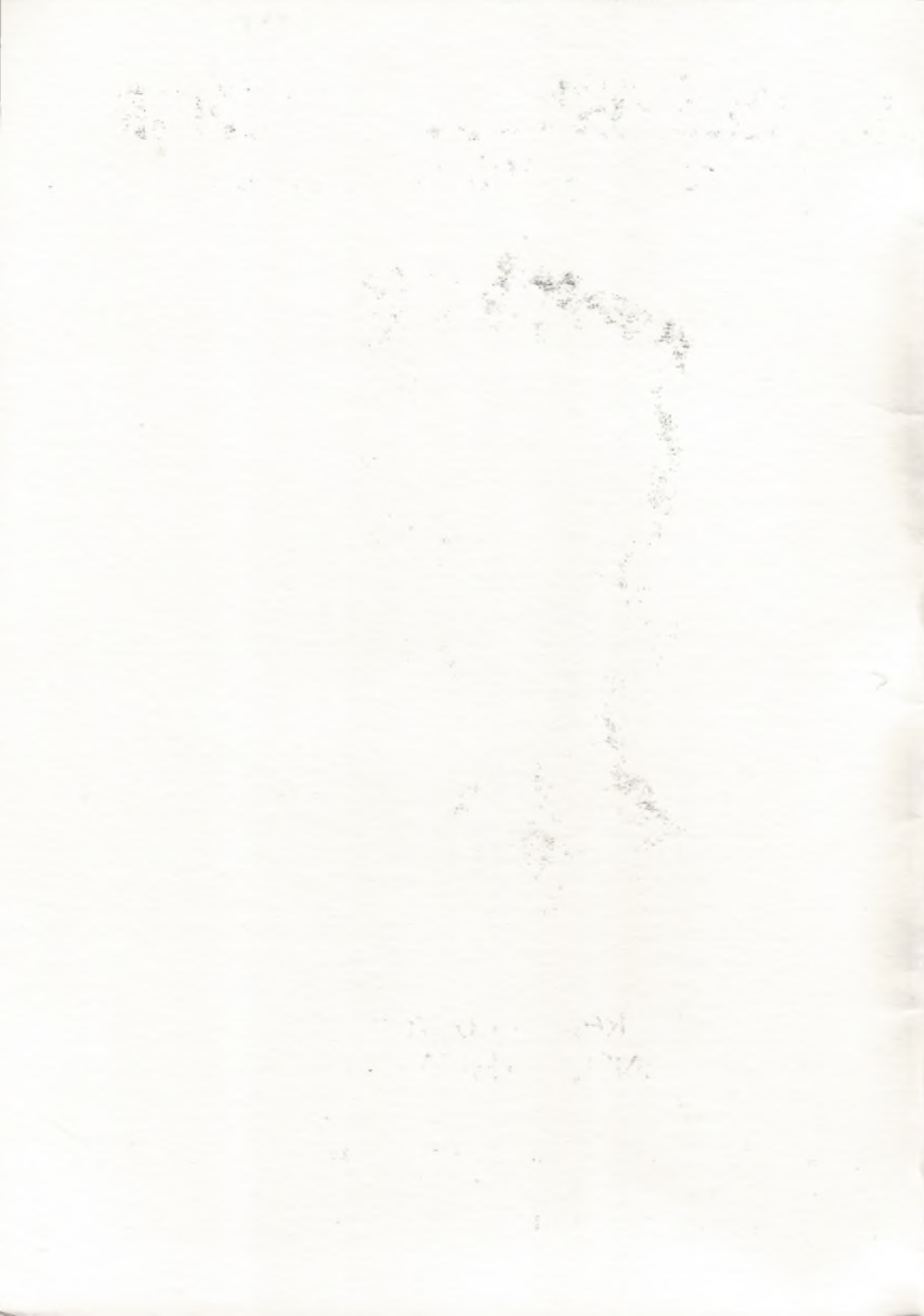
GEORGE ORWELL AND SPAIN

An essay by Bill Alexander



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George Orwell and Spain

Every school student taking O or A Level examinations in modern history is told to read George Orwell's *Homage to Catalonia* in order to gain an understanding of the Spanish War of 1936-1939. This is as useful as studying the Second World War from the story of a small group of soldiers in some quiet corner, far from the main fronts of El Alamein, Stalingrad or Normandy. Even Hugh Thomas, no champion of the Spanish Republic, has said that *Homage to Catalonia* is a better book about war itself than about the Spanish war.

Orwell went to Spain largely ignorant of the background, situation and the forces involved. He admits 'when I came to Spain I was not only uninterested in the political situation but unaware of it.' Unlike many European intellectuals he had not understood the essential clash between liberty and fascism. Hitler's brutal destruction of democracy in Germany and even Mosley's violence against opponents in Britain in 1934 must have passed him by. Crick, his biographer, could write that before March 1936, when Orwell saw Mosley's blackshirts beating up questioners at a Barnsley meeting, 'there is no indication before this incident of any great concern in Orwell with the nature and spread of fascism.' Orwell himself wrote in April 1936: 'I would like to know whether Mosley is sincere in what he says or if he is deliberately bamboozling the people.' This a couple of weeks after the brutal treatment of anti-fascists at a blackshirt rally at the Albert Hall had provoked a storm of public protest.

The Spanish Popular Front government, formed after the

elections in 1936, won a substantial majority of parliamentary seats but only just over half of the popular vote. The government drawn from Republican groups began to implement a limited programme of social and liberal reforms. This was too much for the strongly entrenched reactionary forces of Spanish society – landowners, church hierarchy and army officers. Led by the top Generals, a military uprising against the Republican Government, planned and prepared well beforehand, took place on 18 July 1936.

The rebels took with them most of the Army, the paramilitary Civil Guards and most of the personnel of the civil service and organs of government. The loyalty of those not openly joining the revolt was open to question. Decisively, the rebels were assured of help before and immediately after the rising from Hitler's Germany and Mussolini's Italy – the two openly fascist powers of Western Europe.

Military coups and *pronunciamentos* were no new feature in Spain. The generals were confident they would win a quick, easy victory. It was not to be. The people – workers, peasants and middle classes – fought back with incredible *élan*, and in spite of heavy losses, they captured barracks and took weapons in many towns and localities. After the first days five out of the seven main cities were in the hands of the government. But General Queipo de Llano, taking over Seville by bluff, massacred the workers and then poured in the trained and disciplined troops of the Army of Africa through the airport in planes provided by Hitler. Zaragoza was an anarchist stronghold, but the workers were tricked into passivity, giving the rebels control of this key communication centre between the South and North. If the government had exercised a firm united command, workers and loyal forces could have taken these centres and the Generals been defeated.

But the government delayed for the few critical days before releasing arms to the workers. The people, without central leadership at this stage, did not realise the need for offensive action. The Madrileños, helped by loyal army elements, defeated the rebels in the city and moved out spontaneously to defend the passes through the Guadarrama mountains, but did not push on. The victorious workers of Barcelona drove in columns consolidating loyalist control of Catalonia and most

of Aragon, but when they met firmer resistance, almost at the gates of Zaragoza and Huesca, halted their advance. Though their arms were limited a planned concentration of forces and weapons could have taken both towns. As it was, John Cornford, a Cambridge student who joined the POUM militia in early August, complained of boredom and inactivity in front line positions just outside Huesca. Later the group of Independent Labour Party (ILP) volunteers, including George Orwell, sat in roughly the same positions outside Huesca from January to June 1937 and then returned home to Britain.

Another reason which brought the advances into Aragon to an end was the dominant political outlook among the workers. The CNT, led and inspired by anarchists, and the POUM, a breakaway group from the Communist Party of Spain, though wanting to defeat the fascists, believed that a revolution should be made. Having defeated and driven the enemy from their own immediate area they concentrated on building a revolutionary society.

The people of the Extremadura, Andalucia and Madrid had no such opportunity for speculation. Their harsh reality was the rapid advance northwards of Franco's Army of Africa, supported in all ways by Hitler, aiming to capture Madrid and link up with the fascist-held areas of Navarre and the North. There was little scope for thinking of the form of society in the future – the one task was to stop and defeat the fascists. The bodies of the butchered peasants, workers and progressive people, the screams of the raped women and orphaned children, were the political arguments that the defeat of Franco and the foreign invaders claimed absolute and complete priority. Though always ill-armed, often in confusion and with weak leadership, the workers' militias fought with tenacity. They knew that if the fascists reached Madrid its capture would mean the defeat of the Republic, the end of any hopes of a socialist revolution. Franco was stopped in the streets of Madrid. Meanwhile, the Aragon front was dormant.

Progressive and anti-fascist people throughout the world watched Spain. Would it be yet another country falling to fascism? Would Hitler and Mussolini, using their front man Franco, put out the fresh lights of freedom in Spain? Could the dictators be allowed to send trained units of their forces to help

fascism while the Spanish people struggled alone?

At first spontaneously and then in an organised way, men and women from all over the world made their way to help the Spanish people. Most joined the International Brigades, which were formed officially in Albacete on 12 October 1936. The first hastily formed Brigades went to Madrid and joined the bloody fighting, stopping Franco's forces which had got into the city itself.

A few hundred foreign anti-fascists joined the CNT and POUM-influenced units, based on Barcelona. They went to the fronts in Aragon, outside Zaragoza and Huesca.

In Britain the Communist Party largely organised and influenced the 2,300 volunteers who joined the International Brigades. The ILP recruited the forty-odd volunteers who served with the POUM and anarchist units in Aragon.

There were important differences between the two organisations in their approach to the Spanish struggle. Fenner Brockway, leader and theoretician of the ILP, accepted the views of the leaders of POUM that the need was to prepare Soviets of workers and peasants to take control in the crisis; that the Popular Front agreement tied the working class to a non-socialist government 'putting class struggle into storage' and that the demand for a unified military command took the initiative from the workers. Even late in the war, when the fascists had made great advances and the Republic faced defeat, Brockway was still speculating that if the socialist revolution was to take place after the fascists were defeated the forces to carry out the socialist revolution must be prepared and stimulated to seize the opportunity when it arrived. (It must be said that Brockway in his autobiography *Towards Tomorrow* (1977) recognises the weakness of his attitude then.)

Harry Pollitt, the General Secretary of the Communist Party, urged constantly that the immediate issue was to defeat fascism and, calling for help for the Spanish people, said 'they are defending democracy, not only for themselves but for all people.' He stressed that the overriding task, the only path which could lead to any future, was unity in struggle to defeat fascism.

This difference in estimate, reflecting the differences inside Spain, dictated the fighting and fortunes of the two groups of

volunteers from Britain – those in the ILP groups and those in the British Battalion of the International Brigade.

Progressive people everywhere in Europe expressed their support and desire to help. They had seen the persecution of writers and artists because of their views on race, the burning of the books by the Nazis. They were concerned that the 'lights of freedom' would go out in yet another country. Felicia Browne, an artist graduate of the Slade School, joined the militia in the first days and was killed on 25 August 1936. Writers such as Ralph Bates, Ralph Fox and Charles Donnelly, and students like John Cornford, Bernard Knox, Sam Lesser and James Albrighton went to fight. Sylvia Townsend Warner and Valentine Acland saw the plight of the wounded and then campaigned in Britain for Medical Aid. Sir Richard Rees, Julian Bell and the Boulting brothers drove ambulances. Others like Stephen Spender, W.H. Auden and Edgell Rickword visited Republican Spain and wrote about the struggle.

This was the atmosphere in which George Orwell decided, in December 1936, to go to Spain to write or to fight. Orwell, under his real name Eric Blair, went to see Pollitt at the Communist Party's London headquarters to ask his help in getting to Spain. Pollitt refused to help Orwell by using the organisation of the International Brigades. He may have done so because he knew that Blair had served in the imperialist police force in Burma, and Ralph Fox and Dave Springhall, Political Commissars in Spain, had been stressing that all volunteers must have firm anti-fascist convictions. Pollitt then had a close relationship with Victor Gollancz, the publisher, and may have heard of the contents of Orwell's manuscript *The Road to Wigan Pier*. (When this did appear as a Left Book Club choice Pollitt wrote a scathingly bitter denunciation.)

So Orwell went along to the ILP who were preparing to send volunteers to Spain and secured their help.

It is interesting to speculate what would have happened if Orwell had been allowed to join the British Battalion of the International Brigade. In the intense political life and arduous fighting his physical bravery might have been steeled and tempered into steadfast courage, his basic misanthropy replaced by comradeship and trust in humanity, his political

ignorance and naivety turned into understanding, so giving him the purpose and cause he looked for, without success, all his life. If this had happened, who could the establishment have found to provide a best-seller to obscure and denigrate the real issues in the struggle against fascism?

At this time Orwell was not a member of the ILP, indeed he did not become a member until much later, in June 1938. In Barcelona he got in touch with John McNair, the ILP political representative and, as Orwell writes in *Homage to Catalonia*, 'I had come to Spain with some notion of writing newspaper articles but I joined the militia almost immediately because at that time and in that atmosphere it seemed the only conceivable thing to do.' McNair, possibly concerned that a well-known recruit should go off to join the International Brigade, wasted no time in attaching Orwell to a POUM unit. His value there, despite his knowledge of the rifle mechanism, must have been doubtful. Cornford months earlier had found himself in a similar unit of mainly Catalan-speaking POUMistas and, expressing his frustration at their inactivity, joined the International Brigade. After a short period with one other British volunteer in a unit of POUM militia, Orwell joined the group of about 30 volunteers who, organised by the ILP, had travelled out together from Britain, although only a few were actual members of the ILP. Some of the group thought they were joining the International Brigades and indeed in April no less than nine said they wished to join the British Battalion. The group joined the 29th Division under political control of POUM.

In July 1936, at the start of the fighting, all the political parties and trade unions organised their own militia groups and units. But the disasters and fascist advances soon brought the realisation of the need for an organised army and a unified command. On the central and southern fronts, the places of heavy fighting, this was achieved, with some difficulty. But on the quiet Aragon front the POUM and CNT kept largely aloof from reorganisation and unified command, retaining their political control under new titles. The influence of the POUM was declining and they could only muster 6-8,000 men. Their 29th Division with Orwell and the ILP group among them sat on the mountains often far from the fascist lines. In Orwell's

own words 'I saw very little fighting. Nobody bothered about the enemy.'

At this time the fascists, having been beaten in their attempts to capture Madrid, were concentrating to take the coal, iron and engineering centres of Asturias and the Basque provinces. Pressure on their flanks from the Aragon front would have made this more difficult. Orwell complains that action was impossible because of the lack of rifles and artillery, but, because of the 'Non Intervention' agreement, this was the general lot of all Republican forces.

Whatever arms the government was able to obtain naturally went to the active fronts. But Orwell himself describes what could have been done in his account of the one offensive raid his group made. George Kopp, the Company Commander, was a Russian brought up in Belgium with no previous military experience. He describes, in a page-long story in the ILP paper *New Leader*, how in a raid by 15 men, and with only one casualty, they captured 2,000 rounds of ammunition and some bombs and 'their action compelled 20 lorries carrying 1,000 troops to be sent from the Alaso front.' Kopp's precise knowledge of the troop movements is very open to question, but the story shows that aggressive action would have weakened the fascist concentration on the North. As it was, the same day the ILP group left the front to go on leave to Barcelona the Nazi planes bombed and obliterated Guernica.

Brockway, the *New Leader* and Orwell stress that the ILP group were entitled to go on leave – being allowed five days leave for every month at the front. This certainly did not apply to any other unit in the Republican Army, since it would have meant that one sixth of the army were on leave at any one time – while the fascists were pressing on many fronts. The British Battalion of the International Brigades, despite losing two-thirds of its strength in three days' fighting at Jarama and spending five months in the front line trenches, had only six days out of the line, and then only three miles behind the front.

Barcelona and Catalonia had maintained a quite separate identity from the Popular Front government – partly because of the CNT's anarchist philosophy and partly because of Catalan nationalist separatism. The anarchists did not accept that the fascists could only be defeated by unified, organised

effort and that without their defeat any talk of revolutionary change was futile dreaming.

The government and the growing majority of the Spanish people understood that fascism must be defeated before anything and this needed centralised effort in the military, industrial and political fields.

This difference in the fundamental analysis of the conduct of the war led to tension and difficulties. The leaders of the two main trade unions in Barcelona, the UGT and CNT, agreed not to hold a May Day demonstration for fear of clashes. But the POUM Bulletin of 1 May exhorted the workers 'to begin the struggle for working class power' and *La Battalla*, the POUM newspaper, urged vigilance 'with arms at the ready'.

The government ordered the surrender of all the arms which had been held back in Barcelona in the hands of the political parties. On 3 May they took steps to control the Central Telephone Exchange – still held by CNT. Then elements of CNT (their leaders were generally opposed) and the POUM took to the streets with arms they had hidden, and fighting began. The government used its armed police forces and brought in Assault Guards from Valencia. The fighting lasted four days, with casualties, until the government established control. Though Orwell says no POUM units left the front, Broué and Terminé, French historians in general sympathetic to the POUM position, say that on 5 May groups from the 29th (POUM) Division and from the 23rd (CNT) Division left the front, concentrated on Barbastro (20 miles from the front) to march on Barcelona but did not proceed beyond Binefar (30 miles from the front).

Orwell and the ILP group were caught up in this difficult, complex situation. Negrín, who became Socialist Prime Minister after the May events in Barcelona, became friendly with Orwell in London in the 1940s. He wrote:

He [Orwell] came to the chaotic front of Aragon under the tutelage of a group *possibly* [Negrín's italics] infiltrated by German agents (read what he says about Germans moving freely from one side to the other and what the Nazis officially stated after the war about their activities on our side) but *certainly* [Negrín's italics] controlled by elements very allergic, not only to Stalinism (this was

more often than not a pure pretext) but to anything that meant a united and supreme direction of the struggle under a common discipline.

(Negrín's little-known relationship with Orwell is discussed by Herbert L. Matthews in an article in the New York magazine *The Nation*, 27 December 1952.)

Only a very few of the group were old members of the ILP, understanding and supporting the political position of POUM. Hugh O'Donnell, a British Communist working in the Foreigners Department of the PSUC (United Socialist Party of Catalonia) met Orwell (Eric Blair) and a number of the ILP group when they arrived in Barcelona on 30 April. He wrote to Pollitt in London that many of the group were discontented and frustrated with being in the POUM unit and he listed nine men, including George Orwell, who said they wanted to join the British Battalion in the International Brigades. O'Donnell wrote: 'the leading personality and most respected man in the contingent at present is Eric Blair. He has little political understanding and said he is not interested in party politics and came to Spain as an anti-fascist to fight fascism. As a result of his experience at the front he has grown to dislike the POUM and is now awaiting his discharge from the POUM.' Orwell himself bears this out in a letter to Frank Jellinck in 1938, after writing *Homage to Catalonia* – 'I've given a more sympathetic picture of the POUM line than I actually felt, because I always told them that they were wrong and refused to join the party.'

Yet Orwell went voluntarily to the POUM headquarters when the fighting began on 3 May. He was given a rifle from their store and helped to guard the building, though he did not fire his weapon and went down to a hotel for meals. Most of the ILP group kept away from the events, staying indoors in their hotels; some then made their own way back to Britain, and others joined non-POUM Spanish units.

Orwell explains his action thus: 'When I see an actual flesh and blood worker in conflict with his natural enemy, the policeman, I do not have to ask which side I am on.' Strange reasoning given his own past, and when one recalls he had not taken part in the unemployed and anti-fascist demonstrations

in Britain, the targets of much police brutality. Even McNair saw the fighting was opening the way to the fascists. Perhaps the clue to Orwell's behaviour may be found in the comment by Sir Richard Rees, his friend and literary executor, on Orwell's account of life on the Aragon front – 'written almost in the style of a schoolboy's letters, it was not bad fun in a way.' Orwell himself wrote 'it was not bad fun wandering about the dark valleys with the stray bullets flying overhead like red shanks whistling.'

Orwell had no understanding of the world-wide significance of the struggle in Spain, he knew little of the national efforts of the Popular Front government to achieve a united front against fascism, he had never seen the Republican flag, he did not agree with the actions of the POUM – he took the rifle in the role of an outsider, a journalist looking for different experiences to figure in a future book.

When the fighting was over, with the CNT leaders convincing those who were still fighting of the folly of their action, only *La Batalla* urged the continuation of the fighting and spoke of 'the glorious days'. On 10 May Orwell and what was left of the ILP group returned to their front. Wally Tapsell, a political leader of the British volunteers, had gone from the International Brigade Base in Albacete to establish contact with the group and persuade them to join the British Battalion, but McNair would not let him have discussions with them.

Again of this POUM-held sector Orwell says 'there was not much happening at the front', though at this time 4,000 Basque children were being organised in Bilbao to be sent to safety in Britain, while Franco's concentrated forces smashed the last defences of the Basque country. Ten days later Orwell was hit in the throat by a bullet and after treatment in several hospitals arrived at a POUM convalescent home.

After the May events in Barcelona the Popular Front government took steps against the POUM. Its paper was suppressed, many of its leaders arrested, and its military units disbanded. Most of the ILP group had already gone home to Britain. At the end of June Orwell, his wife, McNair and Cottman decided that they might be arrested and left Spain.

Orwell went to his home and began the actual writing of *Homage to Catalonia*, though he had been thinking about the

book in Spain. Warburg (of Secker and Warburg – the eventual publishers) says that Orwell saw him in December 1936 saying 'I want to go to Spain and have a look at the fighting ... write a book about it. Good chaps these Spaniards, can't let them down.'

Bob Edwards, leader of the ILP group at the front, wrote about Orwell's attitude to the war: 'I got the impression that he was allowing his needs as a writer to override his duty as a soldier. He was wanting, I thought, as many experiences as possible as background material for the book he was writing.' On 9 May 1937, almost before the fighting was over in Barcelona, Orwell wrote to Gollancz, 'I hope I shall have a chance to tell the truth about what I have seen. I hope to have a book ready for you about the beginning of next year.' Gollancz refused to publish it, but *Homage to Catalonia* appeared in 1938 and today, in 1984, it has appeared in twenty reprints.

How does Orwell himself appear from his own writing of his life as a soldier? There is a strong sense of remoteness and detachment from his comrades-in-arms – both in the ILP group and the Spaniards and other nationalities in his company. He appears as a loner. This characteristic is in reality confirmed by the fantasised, romanticised account – both in his book and in his near-doggerel poem – of his very brief encounter with an Italian volunteer in the Barcelona barracks.

The conditions of muck and filth in the shallow trenches, expressive of primitive life in most of Spain, are scathingly described. There is no account of efforts to change conditions and so, by example, help to break Spain from its primitive, backward past. He states that the floor of his unit cookhouse was deep in wasted food. It must have been unique among all the Army cookhouses. The shortage of food was general – mess tins and utensils were scraped clean by the ever hungry soldiers.

His aloofness from the common spirit of Popular Front Spain is strikingly exposed in his cynical dismissal of the fact that wounded soldiers demanded to return to the front. It happened! Without this spirit the Republican forces, outnumbered and outgunned, could not have fought on for eighteen more months after Orwell had gone home. Resistance to Franco would not have persisted despite forty years of terror

and repression following his victory.

Although Orwell admits that he saw very little fighting, was in a remote, dormant sector of the front and hurried out his book without time to study the military lessons of the fighting on the Madrid, Málaga or Basque fronts, he has no hesitation in pronouncing on military matters. In an Olympian, chauvinist way he says, 'The Spaniards are good at many things but not at making war.' But the Spanish people, despite most of the regular army going over to Franco, deprived of weapons, held back not only the Spanish fascists but large military units of German and Italian forces for thirty-two months. Far longer than the French and Belgian forces did in 1940!

He pronounced that 'the anarchist militia, in spite of their indiscipline, were notoriously the best fighters among the pure Spanish forces.' The reality was that their behaviour in battle, because of their philosophy, was unpredictable – brave advances negated by unnecessary retreats. Durruti's column of 3,500 avowed anarchists from Barcelona went to Madrid in the crucial battles for its defence – at times they fought as fiercely as anyone, but at others left open vital sectors in the Casa del Campo, thus allowing the fascists to get a foothold in the city. Indeed it was only when the anarchist soldiers, after experience in battle, recognised the need for unified leadership, organisation and discipline and so changed their philosophy that they became dependable units in the Popular Army.

The fundamental reason for Orwell's attitude to the war – on top of his British upper-class arrogance and overriding personal objective to write a book – was his lack of understanding of anti-fascist feeling. He had visited, with an eye to a future book, the down-and-outs in London. Commissioned to write a book, he had briefly visited the distressed industrial areas of the North of England. But there was no sense of identification with the men and women caught in the capitalist crisis – no sense that 'there but for my family background go I.' The horrors of fascism in Italy and Germany do not appear to have made him angry, emotionally concerned to do something. This lack of deep feeling, almost one of neutrality, shows itself throughout his writing. The man Orwell refuses to shoot at because he had his trousers down

might have fired machine guns to butcher 4,000 in the Badajoz bullring. The same man would certainly have tried to kill Orwell when he had fastened his belt. Orwell feels no anger at the man who wounds him – indeed wishes to congratulate him on his good shooting. He is certainly not concerned at his own absence from the battle line. Orwell saw the war as a game, material for a book.

After a brief two months in the North of England Orwell wasted little time before writing *The Road to Wigan Pier*. But he used his description of conditions there to attack those drawn towards socialism and communism as a caricature composite figure of 'fruit juice drinker, nudist, sandal wearer, sex maniac, Quaker, Nature cure quack, pacifist and feminist.' A description ill-fitted to his guides, leaders of the National Unemployed Workers' Movement, one of whom, Tommy Dignan, was to become a tough fighter in the International Brigades and a leader of the Yorkshire miners. No! Orwell had qualities as an observer but his conclusions have little relation to what he had seen.

So retiring from the Spanish War, admitting that he knew little before he went and saw little there, again he wasted no time in studying the complex situation before expounding his opinions. It is true that after the ILP group went home the *New Leader* largely ignored the Spanish war, but the *News Chronicle*, *Daily Worker* and Tory newspapers all carried reports showing the tenacity and determination of the People's Army. But Orwell used his skill as a writer to mask his prejudices and ignorance.

Throughout his writing his sheltered life-style coupled with his ignorance of the realities of Spanish life led him to many pronouncements hostile to the people. 'The latrine in the Barcelona barracks did its necessary bit towards puncturing my own illusions about the Spanish civil war.' He was familiar with water closets in his middle-class English surroundings, but they were unknown outside the bigger Spanish towns. His recurring thought was 'the detail of our lives was just as sordid and degrading as it could be in prison let alone in a bourgeois army.' Life in the Republican Army was hard, often very hard. There were times of danger and diarrhoea when men had to relieve themselves in the slit trenches. But the soldiers, coming

from mainly peasant backgrounds, tried to keep clean, learnt to read, wrote home, sang and discussed, thus showing that the fuller life they were fighting for was beginning in the trenches. In another of his cynical, oft-quoted pronouncements Orwell says: 'a soldier anywhere near the front line is usually too hungry or frightened or cold or above all too tired to bother about the political origins of the war.' Orwell, despite his very limited experience, had not bothered to acquaint himself with the behaviour of the men of the Lister, Modesto, Campesino and other Spanish units who showed outstanding fighting qualities because 'they knew what they were fighting for and loved what they knew.'

If Orwell was sincere and honest with himself he must have been aware of his limitations and his temerity in writing *Homage to Catalonia*. When he met Negrín on a number of occasions in 1940 he did not tell him that he had fought in Spain and written *Homage to Catalonia*. Negrín did not know of Orwell's book at the time, and wrote of Orwell: 'he was very eager to enquire about policies, internal and external in line with conduct of the war. I have the impression that Orwell was satisfied with my explanations given to him without reserve.' Orwell's silence about his experiences in Spain and his failure, given this unique opportunity, to check his views and conclusions can only bring into question his honesty. But there is no sign in Orwell's essay 'Looking Back on the Spanish War', written in 1943, that he was willing to modify his written opinions and admit that he had pronounced without understanding.

Many other writers on the Spanish War have expanded on the difficulties, confusion, muddle and frequent incompetence in the Republican front and rear. But the great merit of Orwell's writing in the eyes of the establishment is his contention that the revolution was cynically betrayed, and that the Popular Front collapsed into warring factions. Orwell is used to distract attention from the real lessons of the struggle – though it must be said that young people, despite the obfuscating influence of Orwell's book, still want to learn what really happened.

Fascism in Italy and Germany had appeared invincible, almost inevitable as a stage in social development. Mosley, the

Daily Mail and his supporters in Britain were confident that democracy and the working-class movements would be broken. Spain and its defenders destroyed such ideas when they held in check the fascist war machines for nearly three years. Orwell sneered at the Popular Front slogan 'It is better to die on your feet than to live on your knees' but it entered the consciousness of the democratic armies in the Second World War, and it was the philosophy of the resistance fighters throughout occupied Europe.

The German, Italian and Austrian democratic movements were defeated by fascism because they could not agree to sink their differences and did not accept that the defeat of the fascist menace took priority over all else. From 1934 the Spanish people understood and worked for united action against reaction. The Popular Front pact of January 1936 was an electoral agreement, but the bitter experiences of the war brought the political groupings together as they saw that reaction threatened them all. This meant changes in political ideas. The anarchist philosophy crumpled and retreated when faced with better armed and organised fascist units. The communist and socialist ideas – organisation and priority to defeat fascism – were proved right in practice and gained ground. The Communist Party, in particular, gained influence because the Soviet Union was the only power to give active help to the government, and because the Communists had shown in policies and by personal example the ways to victory.

When Orwell left the front for Barcelona he deplored the fact that civilian clothes had replaced the uniforms seen in the city in January. True, for the Spanish people the red scarves and the euphoria of the early days had been replaced by the grim, sober realisation that the defeat of fascism was going to be very difficult. Orwell did not understand or even know about the general organisation and training going on outside the towns to form a Popular Army. He did not understand the general demand by all groups in the government that Catalonia and Aragon should also end romantic, adventurist talk and inactivity, get industry working for the war and the men organised into effective military units.

The POUM slogan 'The war and the revolution are inseparable' had already been shown as hollow phrase-mongering – an

attitude which threatened both the war effort and the prospect of any revolution. Those sectors where the POUM and some anarchist elements held influence, far from being on the offensive in fighting the fascists, were stagnant. As Orwell put it 'We didn't worry much about the enemy.' Far from winning more support for revolutionary change, there was growing opposition by small farmers and land workers to the 'libertarian' experiments imposed by POUM and anarchists in much of Aragon.

Orwell, in his version of the Barcelona events and his pronouncements on the Spanish scene, directs his anger at the Communists and the Soviet Union, saying that 'the one thing for which the Communists were working was not to postpone a Spanish revolution till a more suitable time but to make sure it never happened.' Orwell had had little contact with Communists. There were certainly none at that time in the ILP group, he could have read very little of their policies and attitudes (the ILP group complained that they only received the *New Leader*), and the statements by Spanish Communists like Pasionaria, Lister and Modesto were ignored in *La Batalla*.

The Spanish government which was taking steps to bring Aragon and Catalonia into the war effort had only two Communist Ministers; it was far from being Communist, as even Crick, Orwell's biographer, continued to suggest in a recent television programme. Prieto, a right-wing socialist and certainly no crypto-communist, had, from the War Council, initiated the military moves to end the chaos in Barcelona. The two anarchist Ministers in the government, García Oliver and Frederica Montseny, appealed to the anarchists to stop fighting. There was general popular condemnation throughout all Republican Spain of those who were undermining the defeat of fascism.

Orwell's views of the possibility of a revolution in Spain in 1936 and 1937 were naïve in the extreme. The conditions and forces to make a revolution did not exist. The dictators had shown their determination to defeat the Popular Front even before the Generals revolted. The USA, Britain and even the Popular Front government in France helped the fascists and hindered the Republic, especially by depriving them of their right to buy arms. The German and Italian workers were held

in subjection, while in Britain the TUC had gone along with 'Non Intervention' until September 1937. There could be very little support from outside for a revolution in Spain. By November 1936 the fascists had conquered nearly half Spain and had a foothold inside Madrid, being checked only by bloody battles. Even the Barcelona Regional Committee of the CNT said on 4 May – while Orwell was guarding the POUM headquarters with a rifle – that 'It is fascism which must be defeated.'

The Soviet Union had become very popular in Spain because it was were the only power to fight in the London 'Non Intervention' Committee and the League of Nations for the legal right of the Republic to buy arms. Their words were backed by supplies of arms and food. In the early days they sent a few pilots, tank crews and military instructors and advisers to help the Republican Army. According to Soviet sources only about 2,000 military men went to Spain and there were never more than 600 to 800 there at one time. The delivery of Soviet material was very difficult and hazardous; their ships were attacked by the Germans and Italians in the Mediterranean and the French government blocked supplies by land. Chamberlain was manoeuvring to isolate the Soviet Union diplomatically while encouraging the fascists. The Soviet Union had every reason – morally and politically – to work for the victory of the Republican government. But they did not have the power and influence either to start a revolution or equally to delay one.

Orwell's political estimation of the position in Spain and of the Barcelona May events have small foundations in reality. His position as an outsider is confirmed in his description of England as he retired from the Spanish struggle – 'all sleeping the deep, deep sleep of England'. His London-bound train may have passed another carrying British volunteers to help the Spanish people fight on for another two years. In the poor streets of Wigan and Barnsley unemployed men and women were collecting food and medical supplies. In Stepney and Cheetham anti-fascists were resisting Mosley's blackshirts. In meetings, organisations and demonstrations the people were exposing Chamberlain's sell-out and appeasement and demanding real opposition to the fascist powers and their

preparation for war. In England the people were understanding the depth of Pasionaria's appeal: 'Stop the Bombs on Madrid and Barcelona or they may fall on London and Paris tomorrow.'

Orwell had not learnt the true lessons of Spain.

